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Leadership Challenges: *SOLs Have Altered Principals' Roles*

By Susan T. Noble
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There was a time, not so long ago, when the prospect of a trip to the principal's office filled students with a mixture of awe and dread. The principal was a remote figure to most students, especially in large schools. He was seen at assemblies, at the bus loop at the opening of the day or at dismissal, and occasionally in the hall. A principal walking into a classroom in the middle of the day was a sure sign that something big was afoot. His arrival was greeted with sudden silence.

In those days, the principal was primarily an administrator and disciplinarian. As William C. Boshier, the former state superintendent of public instruction who now serves as the dean of the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education, has said, if the flag went up the pole every morning and the building was clean and relatively quiet, the principal was judged as doing a good job.

But this model of building-level leadership has been rendered obsolete by the era of accountability. Principals must now fill the role of instructional leader while still serving as administrators and disciplinarians.

There is no denying that some principals were unprepared for this new role. In Virginia and other states that have implemented standards-based reform, stagnant test scores have brought about the reassignment or early retirement of principals unable to adjust to the demands of accountability or meet goals for student achievement set by the school board or central office.

All Schools Are Affected

The stress is greatest in schools with disadvantaged children whose achievement traditionally lags behind their peers from more affluent backgrounds. But even principals in schools where students arrive well prepared and ready to learn cannot afford to sit back and leave instruction and learning entirely to teachers and students.

A quote from the principal of Roanoke's Ruffner Middle School in a recent newspaper article sums up the new role of the principal as the instructional leader of his or her school. "It's my job to keep students and teachers focused," Catherine Lassiter explained to the *Roanoke Times*.

Ruffner Middle School has made tremendous progress since the beginning of Standards of Learning testing five years ago. Passing percentages on SOL tests in English, history, and science have climbed into the upper 70s. Only a 67 percent pass-rate in mathematics kept the school from reaching full accreditation this year.

Teachers and students interviewed by the newspaper cited a variety of factors in explaining the success of Ruffner Middle School, including team teaching and the formation of after-school study groups to help students who need extra help. While the dedicated teachers at the school certainly deserve praise, Ruffner Middle School's success also illustrates the importance of leadership.

Successful schools are led by principals like Ms. Lassiter who understand that accountability is about students and making sure that they are prepared for the next stage of their education. Test scores and accreditation ratings are means to an end.

To succeed in the era of accountability, the "new" principal must be a coach, a mentor, and a strategist. He must collaborate with teachers and develop school-wide plans for making sure that students are learning the curriculum. He must develop systems for gathering and analyzing data so students who are struggling are identified early and helped.

Constantly on the Go

Today's successful principal spends most of his day out of the office. He is constantly visiting classrooms to observe instruction and the progress of students. He knows how to encourage and inspire his teachers and he arranges for meaningful professional development that is directly related to raising student achievement. Accountability means a principal cannot afford to let a new teacher fresh out of college struggle or frustrate students with ineffective instruction. But at the same time, he must take care that his leadership does not stifle good teachers who are likely to resent and resist micro-management.

And, while doing all of the above, today's principals must still make sure that the paperwork is done, that schedules are maintained, that the building is clean, orderly, safe, and free of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. And he still has to see to it that the flag goes up in the morning and comes down at the close of the day.

The fact that nearly two-thirds of Virginia's schools are now fully accredited shows that most of the commonwealth's principals are succeeding in making the transition from administrator and disciplinarian to instructional leader. It should be a source of pride for all Virginia principals that the National Association of Secondary School Principals selected former Monticello High School Principal Irving Jones, Sr., as the 2003 National High School Principal of the Year.

Using Three-Year Averages

As principal of an elementary school in Goochland County, I can attest to the challenges that today's principals face. Not every fluctuation in achievement is a reflection of the quality of leadership or instruction. That is why I fully supported the Board of Education's decision to allow the use of a three-year average of SOL pass-rates in calculating accreditation ratings.

While principals face new challenges and responsibilities, the era of accountability also has brought new rewards to the job. Because a good principal is the instructional leader of his school, there is a much more personal connection between the principal and the success of his students. Those moments of satisfaction experienced

by teachers when a student or a group of students finally masters a difficult operation or “gets” a hard-to-grasp concept are experienced on a grander scale by the principal whose leadership has opened doors for great teaching and greater learning.

After all, that’s what the job is really about.

(Susan T. Noble, principal of Randolph Elementary School in Goochland County, and member of the State Board of Education, is a 2002 Commentary Columnist)